

SERIES: THE KINGS QUEST FOR MEANING IN THE REAL WORLD
Lesson #1: “An Introduction to a King’s Quest”

Icebreaker: (From materials, explain the Escher prints.) Sometimes life seems like an Escher print, like things are not what they seem or what they should be? What sort of things have you struggled to make sense of in life? Have you ever given up trying to make sense of things?

Ecclesiastes is one man's effort to probe the depths of some of life's most puzzling questions. What is it that brings contentment and clarity in life?

The Challenge of Ecclesiastes:

- **The book of Ecclesiastes can be a difficult book to interpret.** *It's a literary genre, wisdom literature, which we are unfamiliar with. The text appears to be disjointed, without a discernable flow. That makes it difficult for the modern reader to grasp.*
- **The book itself is often cast in a negative and discouraging light.** *Ecclesiastes is often seen as Solomon's lament that nothing in life has any real value or meaning. The main purpose of the book is often traditionally seen as an example of the despair and dissatisfaction induced when King Solomon departs from a God-honoring life. Many see the main lesson of the book to be, "Carefully obey the commandments of God or you'll end up in despair with nothing to show for life." Many see Ecclesiastes as difficult to apply in a Christian's life. They look at it chiefly as a warning against enjoying or valuing anything in this life.*

• **Discussion Questions:**

- *How have you seen the book of Ecclesiastes?*
- *Have you ever made an effort to study it in particular? Why or why not?*

○ **A multi-threaded way to look at Ecclesiastes.**

- *There is a call to sober living in the face of inevitable judgment and death. However, woven into the fabric of the book are seven threads derived from a wise man's quest for capturing a clear view of the tapestry of life. They show that life can be, not only purposeful and enjoyable, but that it is lived before a generous and loving God. The seven threads are:*

1. *An honest assessment of life acknowledging that, from man's perspective, life is often incomprehensible.*
2. *Life on earth is, by its very nature, limited.*
3. *God's overarching control of the universe. In his wisdom, he is purposeful in his expectations of man.*
4. *Some of man's conventional wisdom about life is true, while at other times, it is far from true and leads to ruin.*
5. *Man searches for meaning in things that cannot fulfill, satisfy and make for a contented, purposeful, God-honoring life.*

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6. Life **must** be seen as an **enjoyable** adventure, given as a **gift** from the very hand of God, to be lived to the full **right now**.
7. Life, lived in accordance with God’s commands, including commands to enjoy it, is man’s **chief purpose** in life.

The book doesn’t necessarily follow a strict order of events, however, Chapters 1 and 12 do act as bookends for the journey between them. So let’s examine Chapter one to set the stage before we go any farther.

READ ECCLESIASTES 1:1-18

- **Authorship and Title**
 - Traditionally, Solomon has been credited with being the author as the following internal evidence suggests: The author Describes himself as "Son of David" (1:1), King in Jerusalem (1:1), and King over Israel (1:12) and he was focused on wisdom as Solomon was
 - The Author is identified as "Preacher" or "Teacher". The hebrew word is *Qoheleth* (pronounced Ko - hell- it) from the verb meaning "to assemble." So this person is the one who calls together the assembly and speaks before it. Solomon, with the cooperation of a scribe/editor of some kind actually penned the book.
- **Date**
 - Since we are looking at Qoheleth and Solomon as one in the same, this gives us a relative date for the book of somewhere near the reign of Solomon between 971 and 931 BC. It is most likely from the content of the book that he wrote it in the later stages of life. 1:14 for example seems to indicate extensive life experience as does a great deal of the book.
- **What's the occasion? Why was Ecclesiastes written?**
 - Solomon was a man of immense wisdom who was very interested in the sharing that wisdom. He wrote proverbs to impart wisdom to his Sons. Ecclesiastes is also written in to all who what to learn from his journey.
 - "The assembly" that Solomon has assembled is the assembly of the people of Israel. The book itself is named Ecclesiastes from the Greek root *Ekklesiea*, meaning "assembly"
 - The book is like a journal or log of his journey of discovery, his quest for meaning in the real world. Solomon says in 1:13 he undertook a quest for understanding This accounts for it's clear beginning and end in chapters 1 and 12 being combined with a wandering, journey-like, seemingly disjointed text. Take the Captain's Log from Star Trek (see Teacher's Resources) as an analogy. "When one enters into wisdom's world,

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one embarks on a journey. In the book of Proverbs, this journey leads a person to seek out the order by which creation and society live. In the book of Job, wisdom’s journey leads one on a quest for the presence of God. In Ecclesiastes, the journey leads to the search for meaning in life. Underlying all of these quests is the desire to manage the complexities of life and the “messes” that one encounters along the way. If individuals can find order or God or meaning in life, then they can navigate life’s rocky shoreline.” (Bland, D. (2002). Proverbs, Ecclesiastes & Song of Songs. The College Press NIV commentary. (290). Joplin, Mo.: College Press Pub. Co.

- **Discussion Question:** *Have you ever set out on a similar quest of your own, deciding you were going to make sense of life?*
- **What about wisdom Literature?**
 - *Like Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes is in the genre of wisdom literature. Wisdom literature is a genre of biblical writing that focuses on the practical application of the knowledge and teachings of faith. It is proverbial or axiomatic in nature. Often in poetic form, wisdom literature discusses issues of life and morality, and often gives godly advice to the listener. In Ecclesiastes, Solomon makes a complete investigation of life using the tools of wisdom and then he reports to the reader on his experiences and conclusions derived from them. In contrast, there are few works like this in our era as we tend to be wholly propositional and fact-telling centered in our educational efforts as a result of modernism.*
- **Why a topical approach?**
 - *The rambling nature of the text with its bouncing from topic to topic and inter-twining of observations does not lend itself well to a sequential, chapter-by-chapter, approach to the book. Instead we will examine the five main areas that Solomon seeks to explore as possible places to find contentment and clarity in life: (Have the students give you the categories and list them on the board.)*
 1. *entertainment, pleasure, good fortune and a pain free life*
 2. *stuff and money*
 3. *work/toil*
 4. *Beauty, health, and youth*
 5. *Education/wisdom or knowledge.*

In each instance, we will ask:

- *“Does this really bring meaning and clarity to life?”*
- *Is this pursuit or thing intrinsically good or evil?*
- *What is its proper place for that pursuit in a Godly life?*

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The book really centers around ... **Solomon's Quest: Four Primary Questions to Answer.**

1. Why is life so confusing and full of discontent?

- A great deal of the book's meaning is derived from an understanding of the Hebrew word hebel

הֶבֶל – hebel

hebel, literally breath or vapor, is difficult to accurately render in the English text and has a rather wide range of meaning or semantic domain. The NIV always translates it as "meaningless" and this is a valid translation, however it handicaps us in understanding because hebel doesn't always carry that implication. Always interpreting it that way leads to the wholly negative approach to the book.

hebel can also carry the meanings:

- Vapor, mist, breath, something short lived. The name Abel, as in Cain killed, is derived from the same word. Abel himself is short-lived
- Fleeting or swiftly passing away, like a vapor
- Of little value, vanity, meaningless
- Emptiness
- Useless
- Senseless, Incomprehensible, absurd

The key element in the handling of hebel is the aspect of fleetingness and the idea that, to get life right, one must find meaning in God's priorities. Then one can live life to its fullest. This hints at the abundant life to be found in Christ (John 10:10). The fleetingness aspect can, by analogy, be thought of as elusive, like trying to grasp a mist or vapor in relation to understanding the incomprehensible things in life. For example, the fact that no matter how much one eats, he is only temporarily satisfied or how much money one acquires he is only temporarily satisfied, the fact that God would give man desires that can never be completely fulfilled in this life seem incomprehensible to Qoheleth.

• **Discussion Questions:**

- Why do you think Solomon chose this particular word to use?

2. What does a wise man discover when he looks intently at life?



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- *1:8 - 11 Outlines the continuous and unchanging nature of man and creation. In essence, Solomon is expressing that, although time progresses, many of the factors in life remain fixed. This actually lends to the applicability of the book, because some things never change regardless of time period. Temptations and issues receive new veneers or cosmetic makeovers but are, at their core, the same. Man's nature is alike in this situation. The wicked and the righteous live lives intertwined in the real world where the sinful nature of man bring complexity to life.*
- *1:12 -18 outlines the plan that Solomon undertakes. He will use the tools of logic and reason (wisdom) to investigate life and the things that man seeks. He devotes himself, heart and mind. This means he is bringing all his faculties to bear on the problem. In the end, he distinguishes between the content of conventional wisdom and the method of investigation that is called wisdom. He is confident in the method, but suspicious of the content.*

3. What brings contentment and clarity (meaning/purpose) in life?

- *Solomon says that God has given the task of seeking to man (1:13). He does not explain why. Interestingly this is the last mention of God until 2:24-26. Solomon only mentions God sparingly in the book and never once uses the term Yahweh. He uses the more generic Elohim (also true of Job) to refer to God.*

The fact that Solomon portrays God as active in heaven and his creation, yet is not personal in his activity can be tough for 21st Century Christians to grasp, since we have, perhaps a too personal or familiar relationship with God. Solomon's image of God is more focused on a transcendent God who is both Sovereign and mysterious or inscrutable as opposed to the more imminent image common today. He stresses the distance between God and man, the otherness of God. This transcendent God is in control of the future and remains largely a mystery to humanity. Recall that Solomon and his audience are hundreds of years prior to many of the prophetic writings of the Old Testament and still nearly 1000 years before the fuller revelation of Christ in the new Testament.

Solomon stresses that due to our lack of understanding from God's perspective, man lives in ignorance about much of life. We cannot understand the course of events or why God set them in motion in the manner in which he did. We, from our perspective, live an existence of contradictions. We are limited in our very finiteness, yet, even in the face of divine sovereignty, God has provided us with significant freedom and responsibility. "Divine Sovereignty and human freedom stand in tension in Ecclesiastes." - Bland, CPNIVC (299)

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Even keeping in view the often confusing nature of life, we have a responsibility to enjoy the life we have been given. We must learn the secret of being content that Paul speaks of in Philippians 4:11. We must make the most of opportunities God puts before us. Enjoyment, contentment, clarity in life is a gift from God himself. The question Solomon struggles with here is where do I find this contentment and clarity?

4. **In view of everything that one can discover using wisdom's toolbox, how should you live as a result?**
 - *With all this information and what Solomon is about to discover in his investigation that he is fully devoted to, how should one live life? How do you enjoy life as a gift from God? Is the gift or the giver the source of purpose?*
- **Discussion Questions:**
 - *Are these questions you have asked yourself?*
 - *Do you think Solomon will find satisfactory answers to his questions? Why or why not?*
 - *Where else in Scripture do you see others asking similar questions?*
 - *As Christians, do we have an easier time answering these questions of clarity and contentment in the real world? If so why? Is it wrong if someone struggles with finding contentment?*
 - *Why does Paul refer to becoming contented as finding the secret of being content in Philippians 4? What is that secret?*

We are going to embark on the quest with Solomon to find answers to these four questions and more and that requires us to face several challenges of our own:

- *Don't be afraid to investigate life, he wasn't. God is the one who equipped you with curiosity.*
- *Recognize that seeking contentment and clarity was God's idea. I think these Passages are instructive as to why:*
 - *Jer. 29:13*
 - *Matt 7:7-8*
 - *Acts 17:27*
- *Be prepared to ask yourself where you are seeking contentment and clarity and be prepared for a shift in your thinking and your pursuing.*
- *Between this week and next, make a list of all the places that the book mentions pleasure, entertainment, or good fortune.*